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The Innocent Narrator in

Mark Twain's Roughing It

(TITLE)

BY

John R. Fisher

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1980

YEAR

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# The Innocent Narrator in Mark Twain's Roughing It

## Thesis Abstract

Mark Twain in his travel narrative Roughing It presents a naive, innocent narrator from the East who ventures forth into the largely uncivilized Western frontier during the exciting silver mining boom of the 1860's. In his sojourn the innocent narrator encounters many people, places, customs, values, and experiences that are unfamiliar to him, and because of his status as a tenderfoot unacquainted with the frontier, he is often made a dupe by the mischievous old-timers in the West.

The innocent narrator must go through numerous initiations before he is accepted as a member of the vernacular community. In these various confronting experiences with Western values and customs, he cannot help but feel like a misplaced outsider unaccustomed to the freedom inherent in an uncivilized society. Often the tenderfoot is ridiculed and made ludicrous for pretentious behavior, an inflated opinion of himself, as in the sketches involving animal similes, metaphors, and anecdotes. These sketches are of the bootblack, the Sphinx, the coyote, the genuine Mexican plug, and the governmental official. Often the old-timers in the community make sport of the greenhorn for his own education and for their amusement, as in the sketches of the bootblack, Jim Blaine and his grandfather's ram, and the horse auctioneer.

Twain manages the narrative from the perspective of a first

person narrator who assumes the two-fold stance of a veteran looking back upon his days as a tenderfoot in the West. The naivete of the narrator is deliberately exaggerated for the sake of comedy; he is presented as an individual who seldom confronts any outside force which he thinks he cannot recognize, distinguish, and overcome, and it is the juxtaposition of these innocent, romantic views with reality that is a prime source of comedy for Twain in Roughing It.

The education of the innocent narrator is desirable and necessary, for not until he is initiated into the customs and values of the West is he able to enjoy the varied and vast freedoms that the frontier has to offer. Before his education he was ignorant and naive, but after his transformation from greenhorn to old-timer, he learns the sciences necessary in order to survive in the West, and he is now able to fully participate in the glories that the frontier has to offer.

The Innocent Narrator in  
Mark Twain's Roughing It

Examples in literature of the innocent narrator abound. William Spengemann in Mark Twain and the Backwoods Angel notes that the innocent protagonist usually "confronts the world with infinite good will," and he expects the world or society to treat him with this same kindred spirit. He acts as if a pure heart is the source of unwavering strength, and he seldom confronts any outside force which he thinks he cannot recognize, distinguish, and overcome,<sup>1</sup> and it is the juxtaposition of these innocent, romantic beliefs with reality that is a prime source of comedy for a writer.

In Roughing It Mark Twain fictionalizes a young innocent's journey from Missouri to Nevada during the exciting silver mining boom of the 1860's to examine the Western frontier of America and its system of values and opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Twain manages the narrative from the perspective of a first person narrator who assumes the dual stance of a veteran looking back upon his days as a tenderfoot in the West. The naivete of the narrator is deliberately exaggerated for the sake of comedy. The naivete, innocence, and anticipation of a new world in the West by the youthful tenderfoot who has never ventured away from home is illustrated in the novel's opening paragraph. His first dream of anticipation appears in his imagination of what he will miss and what his brother, who has received an appointment as secretary of the state of Nevada, will see

in the West:

I was young and ignorant, and I envied my brother. I coveted his distinction and his financial splendor, but particularly and especially the long, strange journey he was going to make, and the curious new world he was going to explore. He was going to travel! I never had been away from home, and that word "travel" had a seductive charm for me. Pretty soon he would be hundreds and hundreds of miles away on the great plains and deserts, and among the mountains of the Far West, and would see buffaloes and Indians, and prairie dogs, and antelopes, and have all kinds of adventures, and may get hanged or scalped, and have ever such a fine time, and write home and tell us all about it, and be a hero. And he would see the gold mines and the silver mines, and maybe go about of an afternoon when his work was done, and pick up two or three pailfuls of shining slugs, and nuggets of gold and silver on the hillside. And by and by he would become very rich . . . (pp. 1-2).

The comedy from this early passage arises from the narrator's exaggerated language and his incongruous idea that his brother perhaps might get killed and then write home to Missouri and become a hero. His faulty reasoning reveals his innocence and his own desires for gaining adventure, a fortune, and status.

Early in Roughing It the narrator says,

I was armed to the teeth with a pitiful little Smith & Wesson's sevenshooter, which carried a little ball like a homeopathic pill, and it took the whole seven to make a dose for an adult. But I thought it was grand. It appeared to me a dangerous weapon. (p. 5).

The first person pronoun "I" serves to join the two different personae: the veteran and the tenderfoot. The greenhorn setting out on an exotic journey in the Far West is contrasted to the old-timer who has seen the world and is able to comically look back at these early days of inexperience. As Henry Nash Smith points out, both personae are present in the novel from



the beginning.<sup>3</sup> Regarding this same passage, Spengemann observes that the use of the past tense illustrates the distinction of time between the two personae. The narrator in the first sentence is able to note the absurdity of the pistol from a distance of ten or so years of enlightened experience. In the following sentence he is able to view this pistol through the eyes of the uninitiated. He is able to contrast the innocent's sententious thoughts with an already established reality. Through the juxtaposition of these two viewpoints, the narrator creates a comic irony present throughout the book, which derives much of its comedy at the expense of the innocent narrator,<sup>4</sup> and implies that his Western travels will trace his development from a tenderfoot to a veteran.

This narrative perspective, according to Smith's analysis, indicates that the West is a "source of transforming experience;"<sup>5</sup> the traveler who enters the frontier will undergo a change because his outlook in life will change as he encounters values of loosely organized society where law and order are relaxed.

It can be seen from these early excerpts of the book's opening chapter that Roughing It is the story of a young innocent's journey from society to a land of spaciousness, freedom, mystery, fantasy, and idyllic beauty. The Adamic role of struggling in a new and strange environment--the Innocent Land--<sup>6</sup> places the narrator into a frontier life that has a code of values which he does not understand, and because of this he becomes a comic figure and perceives his encounters in the West in terms of comical situations where incongruity



prevails.

Also noteworthy is that instead of a Westerner or country boy being initiated into the ways of civilized society, which is a corrputing force and limiter of freedom, here an innocent Easterner must be educated to the mores and attitudes of the West, which can allow one to gain freedom, explore mysteries, and become more individualistic. The journey to Nevada represents for the innocent an escape and asylum from all the burdens of the contemporary world:

By eight o'clock everything was ready, and we were on the other side of the river. We jumped into the stage, the driver cracked his whip, and we bowled away and left "the states" behind us. It was a superb summer morning, and all the landscape was brilliant with sunshine. There was a freshness and breeziness, too, and an exhilarating sense of emancipation from . . . the years we had spent in the close, hot city, toiling and slaving. (p. 6).

As the trip begins, the narrator reveals that the stage is filled with mail sacks, and when rearranged, the sacks cover the seats to make a wonderful "lazy bed" (p. 12). Lying down and stripped to his underwear, the innocent begins his journey over a land that is as level as a calm sea. Reminiscent of Huck and Jim's tranquil times on the Mississippi raft in Huckleberry Finn, the stage,

whirled along at a spanking gait, the breeze flapping curtains and suspended coats in a most exhilarating way; the cradle swayed and swung luxuriously, the pattering of the horses' hoofs, the cracking of the driver's whip, and his "Hi-yi! g'lang!" were music; the spinning ground and the waltzing trees appeared to give us a mute hurrah as we went by . . . and as we lay and smoked the pipe of peace and compared all this luxury with the years of tiresome city life that had gone before it, we felt that there was only one complete and satisfying happiness in the world, and

we had found it. (pp. 12-13).

This pastoral vision of life unencumbered by society or rigid civilization reflects a life where each moment can be joyously and freely lived.

However, the innocent's stagecoach ticket is not simply a free and quick ticket for him to enjoy the glories of rural freedom and the vast opportunities inherent in the West. The narrator must first undergo changes that awaken his consciousness as he experiences Western life firsthand before he can fully comprehend and appreciate the freedoms in the West. The innocent has many delusions about the frontier, as already illustrated in his inflated opinion of the "pitiful" Smith & Wesson sevenshooter. Spengemann notes that the greenhorn's delusions about life in the West will only lead to trouble and that maturity and "perspicacity" are much more desirable than his ignorance and old values. The characters the innocent encounters provide him with "examples of conduct appropriate to his enlarged cosmos."<sup>7</sup> For example, Spengemann notes that the Sphinx in Chapter II destroys his Eastern ideas about reticence among strangers, for although she is mainly a burlesque figure, she is unselfish and amicable.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the reverence shown the stagecoach drivers, conductors, and depot agents stresses the value of personal achievement instead of fortunate birth.<sup>9</sup> Spengemann further observes that self-reliance and versatility are praised and necessary, as illustrated in the "first citizen" of South Pass City who holds seven important positions in the town, and the desperado

Slade shatters the conventional idea that an outlaw cannot be a gentleman.<sup>10</sup>

Spengemann also observes that the writers of romantic fiction disguise reality by giving the readers mistruths. The narrator, he notes, must encounter experiences that will strip him of his "shallow optimism and romantic dreams."<sup>11</sup> The innocent finds that Cooper's Indian is simply a disgusting and lowly Goshoot, not the Noble Red Man that he had envisioned. Likewise, romance quickly changes into reality as the narrator crosses the treacherous desert, and naive optimism is replaced by disappointment and disillusion when he finds that silver mining is unrewarded toil and trouble.<sup>12</sup> These experiences discredit his romantic authorities and replace them with first-hand experience.

This education is desirable and necessary for the greenhorn to become a part of this spacious, free land. As a tenderfoot he is blind and inefficient, but once initiated, he learns mining, milling, sharetrading, and other sciences of the West.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, some initiation is necessary in the innocent's education, for as he drops his illusions, he is able to become at home in this new innocent land. Encountering these teaching experiences allows him to develop freely, and at the same time escape from the complexities of civilized Eastern life.

To identify the narrator's role in Roughing It as an innocent and to exaggerate his difficulties in adjusting to frontier life and Western values, Twain utilizes animal anecdotes,

sketches, metaphors, and similes, with the result that the narrator becomes a comic victim. When utilizing animal metaphors and similes, Twain is able to produce language which is fresh, concrete, vivid, and accurate. Animals, though neutral in themselves, have distinctive sizes, shapes, colors, sounds, means of mobility, feeding and resting habits, and connotations. When employing animals in figurative language, Twain focuses upon their physical characteristics and behavior and derives visual images and connotative meanings. When Twain applies the animal's composite meanings to describe human traits and behavior, he enlarges certain aspects of the character's figure and personality so that he appears disproportioned and ludicrous. By exaggerating a specific physical human feature through animals, Twain creates incongruity of character, language, and/or action to identify the precise human element being scrutinized. Twain's primary concern in utilizing figurative language and anecdotes of animals is to reveal the innocent's ineptness, his lack of understanding of Western customs, and his role as a comic victim in the West.

The narrator accepts the Adamic challenge of struggling in an environment that is new and strange--the Western frontier.<sup>14</sup> With limited resources, he enters the West and is cast headlong into a region with a value system he does not understand, becoming a comic figure who sees his Western encounters through comical situations where dissension, or incongruity, prevails.

Twain creates the humorous situations through language, character, and action, along with animal anecdotes, sketches, metaphors, and similes to identify the narrator's role as an innocent and to exaggerate his difficulties in adjusting to Western life. Instead of competing successfully, the tenderfoot becomes a comic victim.

Twain's major concern in using figurative language of animals is to identify the narrator's role as an innocent who encounters trials in the West. For example, the narrator quickly establishes his role as an innocent by describing his preparations for bed and for rising each morning as he journeys aboard the stagecoach. He says he rolls himself up in a blanket "like a silkworm" at night and sheds his "cocoon" in the morning (pp. 20-21). By comparing the simile and metaphor of the insect to his own actions, he introduces humor by belittling his own worth and visually presents an image that describes his process of securing and removing his blankets. In addition, the insect is metaphoric, yet to reach adulthood. This quality of the insect matches the narrator's role as an innocent encountering frontier life.

The narrator again uses figurative language involving animals to create incongruity and to identify himself as an outsider and a comic victim. For example, the narrator is forced to dine in unsanitary stage stations while enroute to Carson City. He describes the deplorable state of one station by describing a vinegar cruet as a "stopperless, fly'specked,



broken-necked thing, with two inches of vinegar in it, and a dozen preserved flies with their heels up and looking sorry they had invested there" (p. 26). Instead of applying animal features to humans, he anthropomorphizes the insects so that they appear grotesque and amplify the squalid conditions he must face in the West.

Unaccustomed to Western jargon, the innocent observes at the stage stations people asking each other to "Pass the bread, you son of a skunk!" (p. 27). Since the tenderfoot cannot understand this metaphoric jargon, Twain jokes about Western mannerisms and at the same time points out the greenhorn's encounter with a new and strange environment.

Through figurative language, the narrator identifies himself as a misplaced person in frontier governmental circles. He accompanies his brother, Secretary of Nevada Territory, on an official visit to Mr. Street in Salt Lake City and tries to gain recognition by drawing out Mr. Street's view on Congress and politics in general. The narrator reports that Mr. Street "looked around at me at distant intervals, somewhat as I have seen a benignant old cat look around to see which kitten was meddling with her tail" (p. 97). The feline metaphors identify the narrator's misplacement as a greenhorn in frontier society, and he becomes a comic butt by his speaking out of turn.

Again the narrator becomes a comic victim when he illustrates his ignorance of a Westerner's expectations of him. For example, he pays a bootblack ten cents for shining his



shoes when a meager ten cents bought nothing in the West. The bootblack contemplated the ten cent piece as if he were examining "a gnat's ear" (p. 122). The simile vividly depicts the innocent's misjudgment of the situation and his lack of understanding the Western monetary system and its custom of tipping adequately. The narrator is insulted when the bootblack returns his money. After hearing the crowd roar with laughter, the innocent says, "I destroyed the mongrel reptile on the spot, but I smiled and smiled all the time I was detaching his scalp for the remark he made was good for an 'Injun'" (p. 123). The humor arises out of the incongruity between the narrator's thoughts and his actions. To protect himself, the innocent relies on smiles and resorts to name-calling, drawing upon the reptile's connotation of despicableness and applies these to the Indian. However, because his comments are unvoiced, the narrator effectively gains no satisfaction and only serves to emphasize his comic position as a greenhorn unfamiliar with Western customs.

In Utah the narrator finds himself out of place and naively condemns the Mormons' practice of polygamy. He burlesques Brigham Young's participation in polygamy through animal metaphors. Since he is naive, he only reports the surface events. For example, the narrator refers to Young's search for one of his "cubs" (p. 104). The metaphor reduces the Mormons' relationship to their children to the level of bears and tigers who have litters of "cubs." Through the connotation associated with "cubs," the innocent satirizes

Young's inability to distinguish his children from one another because of the great number of children in each family.

The tenderfoot again illustrates his naive attitude to convey his repulsion toward the Indians, particularly the Goshoots, who eat "what a hog would decline" and steal "carrion from buzzards and coyotes" (p. 132). He believes the Goshoots and the African Bushmen are "manifestly descended from the selfsame gorilla, or kangaroo, or Norway rat, whichever animal--Adam the Darwinians trace them to" (p. 132). By applying animal metaphors which evoke unappealing images, the narrator attempts to illustrate the bestial nature of the Indians so as to defeat the concept of Cooper's "Noble Red Man" (p. 132). The narrator is able to express his disgust for the habits and customs which he naively believes promote the inhumanity of man by applying these animal metaphors to the Mormons and the Goshoots. The final twist is that the narrator goes on to suggest that railroad entrepreneurs and their employees of the West are really Goshoots, but he finishes by saying that there is "only a plausible resemblance" between the two parties (p. 134). This comparison of the "lowly Goshoots" to the enterprising railroad magnates tends to dispel somewhat his previous unstated glorification of Darwin's white supremacy theory, allowing no one worthy of contempt to escape the barb of his pen.

Twain utilizes animal sketches to illustrate the theme of an innocent's search for a home and a sense of belonging in the West. The narrator travels widely through the West, and

the length and breadth of his wanderings suggest his restlessness and movement toward confronting experience. Throughout the novel he says all he is looking for is a change. This restlessness may be related to his search for a home and a sense of belonging. In The American Adam, R. W. B. Lewis describes the American Adam as an individual who ventures forth into an unknown region to encounter experience; he has no home but seeks one to come from his wandering.<sup>15</sup> Relating Lewis to Roughing It, the innocent's journey from Missouri to the unfamiliar Western environment presents the narrator as an American Adam searching for a home and security. When the narrator's brother invites him to accompany him on his journey to Nevada, the narrator is overjoyed: "It appeared to me that the heavens and the earth passed away, and the firmament rolled together as a scroll! I had nothing more to desire. My contentment was complete. At the end of an hour or two I was ready for the journey" (p. 2). The narrator's eagerness and expectations of the West are evident even from the initial invitation and his response to it.

Through animal anecdotes, Twain examines the values in the West and the tenderfoot's misplacement in the frontier environment. The fable of the foolish town-bred dog with a good opinion of himself and his speed and strength chasing the uncatchable frontier-bred coyote is an excellent paradigm of the duping of the innocent by the old-timer, as well as an examination of the freedom which the Westerners prized so highly. The innocent narrator initially perceived the domesticated

animal of civilization as far superior to the unattractive animal. The narrator sees the coyote as a "long, slim, sorry-looking skeleton, with a gray wolf skin stretched over it, a tolerably bushy tail that forever sags down with a despairing expression of forsakenness and misery, a furtive and evil eye, and a long, sharp face, with slightly lifted lip and exposed teeth. He has a general slinking expression all over. The coyote is a living, breathing allegory of want. He is always hungry. He is always poor, out of luck, and friendless" (p. 32). Despite its appearance, the coyote exemplifies the freedom so desired in the West, for he is not bound by space or hunger, traveling, according to the narrator, one hundred miles for breakfast and one hundred and fifty miles for dinner. By exaggerating his mobility, the narrator stresses the animal's freedom to roam in the West. The coyote also demonstrates his freedom from the encroachment of a dog, a "civilized" animal. Although the dog uses its skills and civilized experience, it is unable to pursue the wild animal, free at home in the Western territory. The dog follows the coyote full of "worldly ambition," but the dog remains far behind the animal (p. 33). The dominating power of the coyote appears when one "starts a swift-footed dog after him . . . especially a dog that has a good opinion of himself, and has been brought up to think he knows something about speed" (. 33). Seemingly with little or no effort, the coyote is able to keep a proper space between them. The dog "begins to get aggravated, and it

makes him madder and madder to see how gently the coyote glides along and never pants or sweats or ceases to smile; and he grows still more and more incensed to see how shamefully he has been taken in by an entire stranger, and what an ignoble swindle that long, soft-footed trot is" (p. 33).

The coyote, finally tiring of the game, "turns and smiles blandly upon him once more, and with a something about it which seems to say: 'Well, I shall have to tear myself away from you, bub--business is business, and it will not do for me to be fooling along all day this way'" (p. 34). The dog, after weeping, straining, swearing, and pawing the sand, gives up, returns home, "feels unspeakably mean, and looks ashamed, and hangs his tail at half-mast for a week" (p. 34).

After this first encounter, whenever the town dog sees the coyote, he glances at him with no emotion, and observes, "I believe I do not wish any of the pie" (p. 34). The complete triumph of the wild beast suggests that Twain values the Westerner's strong sense of freedom unrestrained by civilization. The town dog is unaware of the coyote's powers, and his abilities as a domesticated animal are inconsequential on the frontier.

Twain's anthropomorphizing the reactions of the animals, having them speak as humans, is, of course, fanciful, but it allows Twain to exaggerate the conflict and at the same time allows the reader to enjoy the fantasy. Twain also helps to develop reader involvement through the narrator's changing viewpoint of the animal. For instance, the coyote is introduced



as unseemly and the dog as one with "a good opinion of himself" (p. 33). Of course both descriptions are merely masks that are removed when the chase begins and both act with their intrinsic ability. During the chase, the viewpoints of the animals are switched, and the coyote, originally considered unattractive, becomes graceful and superior, and the dog, originally inspired with confidence, becomes crestfallen and inferior.

The town dog, like the innocent narrator, has a more exalted view of himself than he can live up to in this new Western territory. The coyote may look discreditable from an Eastern point of view, but he is obviously in total command of the dog and the event. This early, humorous confrontation foreshadows what happens to the narrator numerous times throughout the book.

Twain uses the tall tale to make sport of the narrator in Jim Blaine's story of his grandfather's ram. According to James Cox, the tall tale emerges in a region or country without a history, and in its basic form it is a romantic tale invented in part by natives "to gull the innocent traveler."<sup>16</sup> The tall tale allows Twain to humorously deceive the listener and gull him into belief. It is a form that allows for the practical joke. It is told to a stranger or scapegoat--an innocent--so that his willingness to believe--his gullibility--affords innocent recreation for the circle of insiders of the community.<sup>17</sup> The story of Jim Blaine and his grandfather's ram is an example of this Western brand of humor. This episode presents the narrator as an eager transcriber of Blaine's tale and ends with



his confession that "I perceived that I was sold," for "the mention of the ram in the first sentence was as far as any man had ever heard him get, concerning it" (p. 104). This frame is similar to that of the "Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog" tale.

Interestingly, Twain makes the reader respond to the story as the narrator had once done, sharing the innocent's chagrin at being duped. Prior to the narrative the reader is told the innocent was eager to find Blaine "tranquilly, serenely, symmetrically drunk," because his friends had told him that at the proper point of drunkenness, Blaine would tell to the end the exciting story of his grandfather's ram (p. 98). The narrator remains in the frame structure as Blaine gives his monologue about his grandfather's ram by diverting to other subjects. By the time Blaine finishes his ramblings, the narrator notices that

the tears were running down the boys' cheeks--they were suffocating with suppressed laughter--and . . . I learned then that Jim Blaine's peculiarity was that whenever he reached a certain stage of intoxication, no human power could keep him from setting out . . . to tell about a wonderful adventure which he had once had about his grandfather's old ram--and the mention of the ram in the first sentence was as far as any man had ever heard him get, concerning it. (p. 104).

This episode also illustrates that genealogy and heritage, values important in civilized circles, have no significance in the West. One of Blaine's diversions in his story is to genealogy. Blaine uses animal-type names and descriptions so that the images implicit in them make ludicrous the persons of his sketch. According to Blaine, Seth was "the pick of the

flock," Sarah Wilkerson was "a good cretur . . . one of the likeliest heifers that was ever raised in old Stoddard," Miss Jefferson was a "poor old filly" with a glass eye, and Mr. Jacobs, the coffin maker, was "a ratty old buzzard" who went "roosting around where people were sick, waiting for em" (pp. 99-100). The figurative language of the animals Blaine employs introduces visual images that create humor in that they exaggerate and distort human traits and nullify the significance of heritage. The narrator's status as a reporter is diminished through his dupery, again underscoring the Westerner's belief in the equality of all men.

Although the West offers potential equality and freedom, the narrator questions the price of these values in the tall tale of Bemis and his buffalo. The mail coach carrying the passengers to Nevada broke down on the prairies. To pass the time, the passengers divert themselves by joining a party going on a buffalo hunt. On hunting buffaloes, the narrator says, "It was a noble sport galloping over the plain in the dewy freshness of the morning, but our part of the hunt ended in disaster and disgrace, for a wounded buffalo chased the passenger Bemis nearly two miles, and then he forsook his horse and took to a lone tree . . ." (p. 44). For a while afterwards Bemis is sullen and withdrawn, but he begins to soften up and tells the travelers the tall tale of his recent hunt. James Cox explains that this introduction serves two purposes: to burlesque the noble sport of buffalo hunting and to serve as

a substitute for Bemis' anger.<sup>18</sup> The narrative is an "ironic inversion" of the noble sport,<sup>19</sup> for instead of "galloping over the plain in the dewy freshness of the morning," a conventional description, the narrator substitutes Bemis' tall tale "which moves through a series of increasingly ridiculous possibilities, culminating with the bull hanging itself while pursuing Bemis up a tree."<sup>20</sup> I. M. Walker notes the story told by Bemis is so full of incredible adventures and ridiculous circumstances that it is obvious Bemis is not really trying to deceive but entertain his audience.<sup>21</sup> Walker also observes that Bemis' story is not rejected by his listeners, but it is accepted by them as a comic experience, which it is. On a psychological level, Walker points out, Bemis' fantastic account of the hunt is a "substitute for anger" and a way to "counteract his humiliation" and failure.<sup>22</sup> Bemis, instead of accepting his failure and disappointment, creates his fantasy with himself as its hero. Walker notes that this fantasy story is a means of "re-establishing his relationship" with the rest of the traveling party "through a ritualistic tale-telling in which all take part."<sup>23</sup>

The innocent narrator becomes part of Bemis' audience as the hunter magnifies the animal's natural habits to create humor through incongruous language and action. Bemis says he would have fired his Allen revolver at the offensive buffalo had it not been so "comprehensive" that other people would have been wounded. He goes on to exaggerate his horse's reaction to the

buffalo to suspend the reader's and the audience's disbelief. The buffalo "seemed to literally prostrate my horse's reason, and make a raving distracted maniac of him, and I wish I may die if he didn't stand on his head for a quarter of a minute and shed tears. He was absolutely out of his mind" (p. 45). When the horse flees from the buffalo, Bemis describes his leaving the dogs behind, passing a jack-ass rabbit, overtaking a coyote, and gaining on an antelope when the rotten girth let go and threw him thirty yards to the left, "and as the saddle went down over the horse's rump, he gave me a lift with his heels that sent it [the girth] more than four hundred yards up in the air, I wish I may die in a minute if he didn't" (p. 46). By mentioning animals noted for their speed, Bemis makes his own speed seem fantastic. He maintains the ridiculousness of his narrative by using language to illustrate the bull's incongruous actions. Falling near the only tree in "nine counties adjacent" (p. 46), Bemis struggles for safety, but the bull miraculously climbs the tree in pursuit with "his eyes hot and his tongue hanging out" (p. 48). Bemis then describes the method of saving himself--he unwinds his lariat, slips the noose around the animal's neck, fires point-blank at the buffalo with his revolver, and escapes unhurt. By inventing this tale, Bemis entertains his audience and diminishes his failure, but the audience has begun to question the truth of his story. After his tale is finished, he is questioned:

          "Bemis, is all that true, just as you have stated it?"

"I wish I may rot in my tracks and die the death of a dog if it isn't."

"Well, we can't refuse to believe it, and we don't. But if there were some proofs--"

"Proofs! Did I bring back my lariat?"

"No."

"Did I bring back my horse?"

"No."

"Did you ever see the bull again?"

"No."

"Well, then, what more do you want? I never saw anybody as particular as you are about a little thing like that."

I made up my mind that if this man was not a liar, he only missed it by the skin of his teeth. (pp. 48-49).

Again, Bemis is not really trying to deceive his listeners. The questions by the audience, according to Walker, seem less designed to catch him in a lie than to encourage even wilder exaggerations and more absurd arguments for the tale's veracity.<sup>24</sup> His tall tale implies the character's need to believe that anything he desires to happen in the West can happen. Bemis refuses to accept failure and disappointment. With the reversal of roles from hunter to hunted, his story becomes farcical and is created by language that describes incongruous and improbable events. His intention, again, is to divert attention from his failure and to come to grips with human disappointment and failure in the West.

The narrator exposes the ambivalence of the West in ' examining freedom, equality, and human disappointment in the sketches of the coyote, Jim Blaine and his grandfather's ram, and Bemis and the buffalo. The pursuit of freedom, adventure, and equality involves risks, both physical danger and changes in one's outlook on life. In animal anecdotes and sketches, .



the innocent narrator illustrates his confrontation with frontier life and emerges as one who does not belong in this Western environment. For example, the "Sphinx" destroys his civilized ideas about reticence among strangers and exaggerates his ignorance and judgment of people in general. This enlightenment of the innocent is illustrated through mosquitoes in an episode of the first evening on the stagecoach. The narrator observes a woman on the coach slapping mosquitoes which light on her arm. As a tenderfoot, he at first observes only the surface events. He considers her a "Sphinx" because she does not speak, and her "bait" is the dead mosquitoes she does not remove from her arm after she kills them (p. 8). The narrator's judgment proves inaccurate. Unknowingly, he makes himself a comic target by referring to the numerous insects in the region. Having finally been spoken to, the woman unleashes in an unceasing monologue her views of him and of Western life. Twain develops the comedy by bringing the narrator into the action and by contrasting the narrator's language with the dialectical language of the woman. She said, "Danged if I didn't begin to think you fellers was deaf and dumb. I did, b'gosh. Here I've sot, and sot, and sot, a-bust'n muskeeters and wonderin' what was ailin' ye. Fust I thot you was deaf and dumb, then I thot you was sick or crazy, or suthin', and then by and by I begin to reckon you was a passel of sickly fools that couldn't think of nothing to say. Wher'd ye come from?" (pp. 8-9). By contrast, the narrator responds to the Sphinx with Biblical



allusions. "The Sphinx was a Sphinx no more! The fountains of her great deep were broken up, and she rained the nine parts of speech forty days and forty nights, metaphorically speaking, and buried us under a desolating deluge of trivial gossip that left not a crag or pinnacle of rejoinder projecting above the tossing waste of dislocated grammar and decomposed pronunciation. How we suffered, suffered, suffered!" (p. 9). By introducing incongruity between the two styles of language, Twain creates humor, and, through the woman's speech, he uncovers the Westerner's values. The woman is direct, blunt, and proud. She doesn't hesitate to ask pointed questions of the narrator and to project her pride, utilizing animal metaphors. She says, "Folks 'll tell you 't I've always ben kind o' offish and partic'lar for a gal that's raised in the woods, and I am, with the ragtag and bobtail, and a gal has to be, if she wants to be anything, but when people comes along which is my equals, I reckon I'm a pretty sociable heifer after all" (p. 9). The animal metaphors the woman applies to herself and others evoke visual images which distort human features, producing humor, and through the animals' connotation, she reveals her values. She does not associate with the "ragtag and bobtail" because they represent the undesirables of Western life. The Sphinx describes herself as a heifer, drawing upon the animal's domestic connotation, suggesting that she is civilized. The narrator sees incongruity between her behavior and her view of herself as a civilized person. Before she departs the stagecoach, she asks the innocent

to visit her in Cottonwood, where she is an established resident. To the narrator the woman and her values are unacceptable, for he vows not to "lay by Cottonwood" to renew their acquaintance (p. 9). This decision illustrates that he is out of place in her company and has endured an uncomfortable experience.

Twain presents a lively anecdote of a potential tarantula attack to reveal the narrator as an innocent who does not have the security of a home in Carson City. The "Brigade" of New York office-seekers who have turned surveyors assemble in their lodging tarantulas under glass tumblers for observation. These hairy spiders were "proud" and "starchy" and would "take up a straw and pick their teeth like a member of Congress" (p. 152). The tables are turned on the surveyors when on returning from an expedition, a "Washoe zephyr" blows the roof of an adjoining building off that crashes into their boarding house, knocking the tumblers over. The "creeping, bloody-minded" tarantulas get loose, and one of the sleepers, remembering the hairy prisoners, shouted to the sleeping men: "Turn out boys, the tarantulas is loose!" (pp. 153-154). The Eastern tenderfeet are panic-stricken. The narrator reports that no one dares leave the room for fear of stepping on one of the tarantulas. With concrete language, he creates a visual picture of men groping and jumping on trunks and beds. The men wait in silence: "The strangest silence . . . waiting, expecting, fear. It was as dark as pitch, and one had to imagine the spectacle of those fourteen scant-clad men roosting gingerly on trunks and beds for not a

thing could be seen" (p. 153). The narrator exaggerates here the reactions of the men to create a comical situation. He further animates the sketch by noting the responses of the men:

"Su-su-something's crawling up the back of my neck!"

Every now and then you could hear a little subdued scramble and a sorrowful "Oh Lord!" and then you would know that somebody was getting away from something he took for a tarantula, and not losing any time about it, either. Directly a voice in the corner rang out wild and clear:

"I've got him! I've got him! No, he's got me! Oh, ain't they never going to fetch a lantern."

Humor is created here by Twain through the exaggeration of the men's responses to the potential hazard of being bitten instead of the actual stinging.

William Gibson in The Art of Mark Twain notes that this episode is an example of the "tables-turned" pattern, and the episode belongs "naturally to the same world as the sorry-looking coyote who persistently and decisively fools the inexperienced dog." It enlarges "the fable of tenderfoot and old-timer."<sup>25</sup> The narrator is again a helplessly pathetic comic victim at the expense of the old-timers, the tarantulas. The humor arises out of the men's responses, magnifying their fears so that their reactions are inconsistent with the actual danger present, for the tarantula bite is not fatal. The tarantula attack also elaborates upon the theme of the narrator's search for a home because it illustrates that he is without a permanent home in the West.

Finally, the anecdote of the genuine Mexican plug is perhaps the most illustrative example of the comic hoodwinking of the

innocent narrator and at the same time indicates that the innocent is misplaced in the West. Twain develops humor by contrasting the innocent's actions and judgment. Upon arrival in Carson City, Nevada, the narrator becomes envious of the romantic-looking cowboys and the ease and speed with which they ride their horses. Having "quickly learned to tell a horse from a cow," he resolves to buy a horse (p. 168). Being sold at an auction is an awkward and unattractive horse, "a black beast that had as many humps and and corners on him as a dromedary, and was necessarily uncomely" (p. 168). When he "could hardly resist" owning the Mexican plug, the narrator becomes a comic victim, for his ardor for and opinion of the horse contrasts greatly with the animal's actual condition (p. 168). Before his purchase, an apparently friendly stranger assures him that the horse for auction is no run-of-the-mill horse, but a "Genuine Mexican Plug!" (p. 169). Surely that must be some kind of thoroughbred which he was not acquainted with:

"I know that horse--know him well. You are a stranger, I take it, so you might think he was an American horse, maybe, but I assure you he is not. He is nothing of the kind; but--excuse my speaking in a low voice, other people being near--he is, without the shadow of a doubt, a Genuine Mexican Plug!"

I did not know what a Genuine Mexican Plug was, but there was something about this man's way of saying it that made me swear inwardly that I would own a Genuine Mexican Plug, or die.

"Has he any other--er-- advantages?" I inquired, suppressing what eagerness I could.

He hooked his forefinger in the pocket of an army shirt, led me to one side, and breathed in my ear impressively these words:



"He can outbuck anything in America!"

"Going, going, going--at twen-ty four dollars and a half, gen-

"Twenty-seven!" I shouted, in a frenzy.

"And sold!" said the auctioneer, and passed over the Genuine Mexican Plug to me. (p. 169).

So pleased with his purchase that he could hardly contain himself, he brought his newly bought prize into the plaza to try him out. The horse

placed all his feet in a bunch together, lowered his back, and then suddenly arched it upward, and shot me straight into the air, a matter of three or four feet! I came as straight down again, lit in the saddle, went instantly up again, came down almost on the high pommel, shot up again, and came down on the horse's neck--all in the space of three or four seconds. Then he rose and stood almost straight up on his hind feet, and I, clasping his lean neck desperately, slid back into the saddle, and held on. He came down, and immediately hoisted his heels into the air, delivering a vicious kick at the sky, and stood on his fore feet. And then down he came once more, and began the original exercise of shooting me straight up again.

The third time I went up I heard a stranger say: "Oh, don't he buck, though!"

While I was up, somebody struck the horse a sounding thwack with a leathern strap, and when I arrived again, the Genuine Mexican Plug was not there. (p. 170).

To complete his public humiliation, "an elderly-looking comforter" (p. 171) approaches him after his eventful ride, saying

"Stranger, you've been taken in. Everybody in this camp knows that horse. Any child, any Injun, could have told you that he'd buck; he is the very worst devil to buck on the continent. You hear me . . . And moreover, he is a simon-pure, out-and-out, genuine d----d Mexican Plug, and an uncommon mean one at that, too. Why, you turnip, if you had laid low and kept dark, there's chances to buy an American horse for mighty little more than you paid for that bloody old foreign relic."

I gave no sign; but I made up my mind that if

the auctioneer's brother's funeral [the "friendly stranger"] took place while I was in the territory I would postpone all other recreations and attend it. (p. 171).

The comedy in this episode rests in the pronoun "I."

I. M. Walker also observes that the humor "arises out of the narrator's ability to remember his own greenhorn days, and to expose and laugh at his former ignorance and vanity."<sup>26</sup> Walker continues, noting that to persuade the innocent to buy the horse, the stranger actually tells him the truth about it, and ironically he draws the narrator into the purchase by telling him of the horse's shortcomings, making them sound like advantages. He then uses the innocent's vanity to complete the sale.<sup>27</sup> Walker further observes that the revealing of the narrator's innocence is even more effective because it is actually of his own doing. His vanity allows him to ride his horse in the town's square before a group of amused spectators.<sup>28</sup> The potentially "cruel situation" is turned into a humorous event because the narrator, instead of expressing destructive emotions of wrath, covers himself up in humor by joining in the fun that the onlookers are having. His feelings of revenge towards the auctioneer's brother are turned into comedy when he pictures himself attending the man's funeral.<sup>29</sup>

The unsettling ride is comically portrayed through language producing vivid images. The ride also reveals the innocent's incomprehension of the horse's abilities; the greenhorn's first perception of the plug proves false. Following his ride, the narrator speaks of "the poverty of the human machinery," saying



that "Imagination cannot conceive how disjointed I was--and how internally, externally, and universally I was unsettled, mixed up, and ruptured" (p. 171). Through this statement the innocent reveals his discomfort and identifies himself as an innocent who is still out of place in the West. His inaccurate view of outward appearances and events again makes him a comic butt in the frontier.

In Mark Twain's Roughing It, the tenderfoot's Adamic search for a home and security is illustrated in the episodes of the governmental official in Salt Lake City, the bootblack, the Sphinx, the genuine Mexican plug, the coyote, Jim Blaine and his grandfather's ram, his room at Mrs. Flannigan's boarding house, and the dining conditions at stage stations. Using animal similes, metaphors, and anecdotes, Twain creates situations that make the narrator look comical, thus illustrating that the narrator is out of place in the West. These same episodes also reveal that the narrator perseveres as an American Adam does, continually searching and struggling towards his homeland.

The innocent's education is desirable because it eventually makes him a part of the free, spacious, and fanciful West. In time he becomes a member of a select society, a vernacular community. As an innocent he is blind, gullible, and inefficient, but after his initiating experiences, he not only knows the customs of the West, but also learns the practical arts of mining, milling, sharetrading, and other Western sciences. As Henry Nash Smith

has so expertly shown, the innocent's experience in Nevada is an initiation into the society of the West, with the narrator becoming a "full-fledged member of the group" when he participates in the fake trial arranged as a practical joke on Attorney General Buncombe, himself a greenhorn.<sup>30</sup> In this episode the narrator is no longer the comic butt he has been throughout the book; he now writes from the point of view of a member of the group which he characterizes as "the older citizens of a new territory" (p. 234).

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>William C. Spengemann, Mark Twain and the Backwoods Angel (Dayton, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1966), p. x.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Twain, Roughing It (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959). All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Nash Smith, Mark Twain (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>Spengemann, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>Smith, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 111, 128.

<sup>7</sup>Spengemann, pp. 16-17.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>14</sup>Lewis, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>16</sup>James M. Cox, Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 98.

<sup>17</sup>Cox, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 100-101.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>20</sup>I. M. Walker, Mark Twain (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 38.

<sup>21</sup>Walker, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>25</sup>William M. Gibson, The Art of Mark Twain (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 49.

<sup>26</sup>Walker, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>30</sup>Smith, pp. 59-60.

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